

SAROJINI NAIDU—SOME FACETS OF HER PERSONALITY

PUBLISHED BY
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NEW DELHI

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Preface

As part of the celebrations of hundred and first birth anniversary of Sarojini Naidu, the National Archives of India organized a symposium entitled 'Sarojini Naidu—Some Facets of Her Personality' on 13th February, 1980.

The papers presented here bring out the distinctive traits of her personality, each writer looking at her from a particular angle. They are interpretative studies endeavouring to capture some significant happenings in her life or evaluating her ideas and their relevance to contemporary India. Prof. V.V. John is impressed by her as a spellbinder; Smt. Tara Ali Baig is in search of a medium to communicate to the present generation her vibrant personality; Dr. Bina Roy brings out her concern for social issues; Shri P. K. Ghosh depicts her as a freedom fighter; and I have endeavoured to assess her role in spreading Asian consciousness.

Sarojini was, indeed, a many faceted personality. She was the embodiment of harmonious life-force. She was a singer of songs and a fighter for freedom. In fact, she was a rare blend of a poet and a patriot. Many have heard about her but few to-day can claim to have heard her in person. Sarojini Naidu was Sarojini Naidu. She was incomparable to any one in any way. This tribute to her greatness is well deserved.

I do hope this booklet will go a long way in keeping her memory green.

S.A.I. Tirmizi
Director of Archives,
Government of India.

Contents

	PAGE
1. Sarojini Naidu : Her Way with Words <i>by</i> V.V. John	7
2. Sarojini Naidu <i>by</i> Tara Ali Baig	12
3. Sarojini Naidu's Views on Social Issues of Her Time <i>by</i> Bina Roy	16
4. Sarojini Naidu and Asian Consciousness <i>by</i> S.A.I. Tirmizi .	25
5. Sarojini Naidu as a Freedom Fighter <i>by</i> P.K. Ghosh	31

Sarojini Naidu : Her Way with Words

By

V. V. John

A hundred and one years ago today, was born Sarojini Chattopadhyaya, who became one of the most delightfully articulate spokesmen of India's freedom struggle. Her probation for this role included, strangely, a period during which she wrote romantic lyrics in English and published three volumes of them. For a while, seemingly, she felt that her destiny was to be a singer of songs.

To priests and to prophets
The joy of their creeds,
To Kings and to cohorts
The glory of deeds;
And peace to the vanquished
And hope to the strong;
For me, O my Master,
The rapture of song.

Though the poems disclosed much technical competence, many of them suffered from a certain wordiness that vastly diminishes their appeal to the modern reader of poetry. The romantic raptures makes us feel somewhat uncomfortable. For instance, the much-quoted 'Palanquin-Bearers':

Lightly, O lightly, we bear her along,
She sways like a flower in the wind of our song;
She skims like a bird on the foam of a stream,
She floats like a laugh from the lips of a dream.
Gaily, O gaily we glide and we sing,
We bear her along like a pearl on a string.

If Sarojini had returned to the theme in the robustness of outlook that was so characteristic of her in her later years, I guess she would have pictured the palanquin-bearers as suitably unionized and reckoning their burden as not so 'lightly' O lightly; And let us not forget that a major English poet, W.B. Yeats, was, about the same time, rhapsodizing over the Lake Isle of Innisfree ('I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree') and took years to acknowledge that the object of his raptures was popularly known as Rat Island, and to severely exclude the poem from his own anthology of modern English verse,

Sarojini, the Lyricist, knew when to quit. But the disdain in which some are inclined to hold her poetic output is overdone, and discloses an unawareness of some beautiful poems, such as 'The Gift of India' where Sarojini celebrated the heroism of the Indian soldiers that had fallen in battle in the first World War. Auden's definition of poetry as 'memorable speech' would apply eminently to this beautiful poem, particularly its closing stanza:

When the terror and tumult of hate shall cease
And life be refashioned on anvils of peace,
And your love shall offer memorial thanks
To the comrades who fought in your dauntless ranks,
And you honour the deeds of the deathless ones,
Remember the blood of my martyred sons!

I have been unable to ascertain who first referred to Sarojini Naidu as the Nightingale of India. The frailty of her figure and the simple music of her verse must have suggested the appellation. And it stuck, and came up in the most inappropriate contexts. Her robust forthrightness of speech and her indomitable spirit that triumphed over sorrow and sickness, do not exactly conjure up the image of the nightingale, and the cliche did less than justice to her vibrant personality. There was much less of the languishing Lady of Shallot than of the Plain-spoken wife of Bath in her mental make-up. Thinking of her, my irreverent mind has found in her a kinship with the ribald figure of his mother that the poet George Barker celebrates in his poem, 'To My Mother':

Most near, most dear, most loved and most far,
Under the window where I often found her
Sitting as huge as Asia, seismic with laughter,
Gin and chicken helpless in her Irish hand,
Irresistible as Rabelais, but most tender for
The lame dogs and hurt birds that surround her,—
She is a procession no one can follow after
But be like a little dog following a brass band.
She will not glance up at the bomber, or condescend
To drop her gin and scuttle to a cellar,
But lean on the mahogany table like a mountain
Whom only faith can move, and so I send
O all my faith, and all my love to tell her
That she will move from mourning into morning.

May I stress again that his image comes to my mind, not so much because of any physical dimensions, but because of the cheerful imperviousness to vicissitudes that the poet celebrates,

How often have we been told of the irreverent and playful manner Sarojini Naidu adopted towards Mahatma Gandhi. I quote a recent testimony from Shrimati Vijayalakshmi Pandit's autobiography, *The Scope of Happiness* "The one person who was really able to help Gandhiji to relax and enjoy a joke was Sarojini Naidu. She was herself a unique human being with a fund of amusing stories and could say the most outrageous things without giving offence. It was she who nicknamed Gandhiji 'Mickey Mouse' when he was at the height of his fame, and he enjoyed this name as much as anyone and asked all sorts of questions about Mickey Mouse, whom he never had seen on the screen. Sarojini was the only one who, so far as I remember, could joke with him on his views of *brahmacharya*, chastity. Once when an article appeared in *Young India*, suggesting several ways of avoiding the temptation of females, the writer advised, among other things, the wearing of dark glasses. As C. Rajagopalachari, popularly known as Rajaji and afterwards our first Governor General, always wore very dark glasses, Sarojini would make all kinds of naughty remarks about him, in which both Gandhiji and Rajaji himself would join. Rajaji's views on the subject were as staunch as Gandhiji's but both put up with Sarojini's merciless teasing. One thing to be remembered and admired is that in those days our leaders could laugh at themselves and at each other, even on matters they considered of great importance. Today, alas, this has become impossible, and the ability to laugh at anything is fast vanishing.

She could talk playfully of Gandhiji's poverty: "you do not know how much it costs us to keep him poor"! Behind all this apparent irreverence was her abiding faith in the quality of grace that Gandhiji brought into the life of this nation. When he died at the hands of a misguided fanatic, her courageous reaction was: "What is all this snivelling about? Would you rather he died of decrepit old age or indigestion? This was the only death great enough for him." Later she wrote: "How and in what lexicon of the world's tongues, shall I find words of adequate beauty and power that might serve, even approximately, to portray the rare and exquisite courtesy and compassion, courage, wisdom, honour and humanity of this unique man who was assuredly the lineal descendant of all the great teachers who taught the gospel of love, Truth and peace for the salvation of humanity, and who was essentially akin to all the saints and prophets, religious reformers and spiritual revolutionaries of all times and lands?" She added: "I love to remember him as the playmate of the children, as the giver of solace to the sorrowful, the oppressed and the fallen. I love to recall the picture of him at his evening prayers facing a multitude of worshippers, with the full moon slowly rising over a silver sea, the very spirit of immemorial India... But perhaps the most poignant and memorable of all is the last picture of him walking to his prayers at the sunset hour on January 30, 1948, translated in a tragic instant of martyrdom from mortality into immortality."

Years earlier, describing Gandhiji's trial in 1922, she had written: "The strange trial proceeded and as I listened to the immortal words that gloved with prophetic fervour from the lips of my beloved master, my thoughts sped across the centuries to a different land and a different age when a similar drama was enacted and another divine and gentle teacher was crucified for spreading a kindred gospel with a kindred courage. I realised now that the lowly Jesus of Nazareth, cradled in a manger, furnished the only parallel in history to this invincible apostle of Indian liberty, who loved humanity with unsurpassed compassion, and, to use his own beautiful phrase, 'approached the poor with the mind of the poor.'" I should like to add here another instance of Sarojini Naidu's sense of history. The year was 1947. She had assumed office as Governor of Uttar Pradesh, and she watched the British flag being hauled down for the last time from the flagpost over the Residency at Lucknow. "As I watched the flag coming down," she said, "I wept." I remember reading the text of a B.B.C. broadcast in which the speaker, a British visitor to India, recalled this with a grateful acknowledgement of the spirit in which Sarojini had reached to a historic event.

On the public platform, she was the most enchanting spellbinder in an era of veritable spellbinders. It was the heyday of Indian political oratory. The soul-killing tediousness of the speech-makers we have to put up with these days, would give us no idea of the contribution that genuine eloquence made to our freedom movement. Even so, there were people who were suspicious of the rhetoric. As Padmini Sen Gupta reports, "Pandit Motilal Nehru, for instance, was suspicious of excessive emotion in politics. After hearing Sarojini's poetic and impromptu presidential address at Kanpur in 1925, which moved most of the audience to tears, his only comment was: 'But what did she say'?" This sent me searching for the text of the address, perhaps the shortest ever delivered by a President of the Indian National Congress. As was her usual practice, she spoke without notes, and by any standard, I find it a most notable performance. It contained a reasoned and impassioned plea for Hindu-Muslim unity, insistence on the need for rescuing the peasantry from their indigence, some wise words on the controversial subject of communal representation and a memorable peroration: "In the battle of liberty, fear is the one unforgivable treachery and despair the one unforgivable sin. With palms uplifted in ardent supplication, I pray that to us in our coming hour of travail may be granted in sufficient measure an invincible faith and an inflexible courage, and that He in whose name we begin our labours today will in the hour of our triumph keep as humble, and in the beautiful words of our ancient invocation:

Lead us out of the unreal into the real,
Out of darkness into the light,
Out of death into immortality,"

As against Motilal Nehru's suspicion of Sarojini's rhetoric, we have the testimony of Jawaharlal Nehru, as recorded in his Autobiography: "I remember being moved also in those days by a number of eloquent speeches by Sarojini Naidu. It was all nationalism and patriotism and I was a pure nationalist, my vague socialist ideas of college days having sunk into the background".

Those who have heard Sarojini Naidu testify that there was nothing contrived in her speeches, for enticing the audience. Her spontaneity was a marvel. A friend of mine told me once of his attending a convocation of Agra University, where Sarojini Naidu was to give the formal address. Talking to the senate members just before the convocation procession formed, Sarojini dismayed everyone by casually exclaiming, "Lord, what am I going to say to these young people"? My friend told me that, despite all the repute of the distinguished guest speaker, his heart sank within him at the prospect of the threatened improvisation. But his dismay was shortlived. Once the speaker started, he was enthralled. He said to me that he had never been thrilled and amused, by turn, as he was that day.

That reminded me of a story of the great actress Ellen Terry who, in a performance of *Merry Wives of Windsor* in a London theatre, suddenly forgot her lines. She was to emerge from under a bed and speak her lines. She emerged all right, but instead of speaking the lines that Shakespeare had written, Ellen Terry turned her beautiful eyes towards heaven and said loudly, "Lord, what shall I do, I've forgotten my lines," The audience roared with delight, and in the tumult, Ellen Terry was able to remember her lines. The perfect rapport that Sarojini was able to establish with her audience was similarly magical. As with Gandhiji and Rajaji, so with any audience in India, she could get away with anything.

I shall end with a rather ribald example. I heard this from another great performer on the platform, Dr. C.V. Raman, who told the story during a scientific lecture on 'Smell and Taste'. He told us that Sarojini was on a visit to South Africa and was being taken round the city of Durban. Suddenly, as they turned into a street, Sarojini stopped and said, "I smell India" the rest of the company presumed that it was some poetic reference to the fragrance of the champak or the jasmine or something of the sort. They were however not left in doubt. Sarojini explained in one word; "Urine!" That was the odour that had assaulted her olfactory nerves. A talent for plain speaking was one of her great gifts. On innumerable occasions, she helped her companions-in-arms to clear their mind of cant. Paraphrasing a well-known line from Wordsworth, we could turn to the spirit of Sarojini Devi and say most fervently, "Thou shouldst be living at this hour!"

Sarojini Naidu

By

Tara Ali Baig

In Indian history, notwithstanding famous queens, and warriors, there never has been a more liberated woman than Sarojini Naidu. Coming as she did from traditional India at the turn of the Century wherein a woman's role was cast in a narrow mould, hemmed in with all sorts of restrictions, Mrs. Naidu in her extraordinary career proved that such restrictions imposed upon Indian women by her ancient society could be cast off as easily as gossamer veil. Sarojini called herself a "poetess-singer". Her friend and fellow political worker C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer called her "dreamer of dreams". Of herself she used to say, "I was a terrible prig. There were times in my childhood when I used to declaim, "what have I done to change the world?" Such were the thoughts of this girl who at the tender age of eleven or twelve was concerned about the world and the possible role she could play in it. Her aspirations were lofty and clearly revealed her serious disposition. It is, therefore, not surprising that as she grew up as a leader she became an element of shakti in the lives and activities of our national leaders, nay in the very stuff of our national life.

It is a common truism that the soil in which a tree is planted determines its growth. This is no less true in the case of human beings. Born in a distinguished family, her father, Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya, was the formative influence. Aghorenath was a man of extraordinary intellectual vitality, a born teacher and a reformer. No wonder that a child growing up in a Chattopadhyaya home would be extraordinary. Precocious as child Sarojini was she quickly absorbed the intellectual influences at home. Like her father who thought himself to be an alchemist, Sarojini, too, was shaping herself in a similar mould of an alchemist, turning words into deeds.

Four men shaped Sarojini's life: her father, the scholarly humanist; Gokhale, the old liberal approaching his end; Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the young liberal looking to future; and Gandhiji. About Gandhiji she later said, "He is my Kanhaiya and I am humble flute."

It has been hinted earlier that for a woman to emerge from a traditional setting was an uphill task. Sarojini was a sensitive person and was easily affected by the way man achieved greatness. In fact she was envious of their greatness. With lofty motives of a dreamer combined with her high-minded-

ness anxious to see the world filled with love, she looked for a stimulus to emulate men. Owing largely to her vast capacity to love and care for all living things with the tender love of a mother in a short time she emerged as a front-rank leader in Indian politics. It is this large heartedness which enabled her to ignore gossip and criticism. And it is this attribute which prompted Gandhiji to observe, "Sarojini and Gokhale are like the Ganges. The Himalaya is unscaleable, one could not launch forth easily on the sea, but the Ganges invites one to its bosom".

Sad to say this glory of a personality fades like a photograph turning yellow with passage of time. Today the fundamental question is how to convey to the new generation of Indians the reality of a vibrant personality like that of Sarojini Naidu. We of the generation who have known Sarojini and the great men and women who won freedom for us are disenchanted, even disillusioned by the petty politics of present day characterized as it is by endless personal wrangles and naked struggle for power. The entire political atmosphere in India is charged with destructive negativism. The ideal of Indian nation and pursuit of national goals which inspired the earlier generation is replaced by the ugly pursuit of personal ends. One may recall the address of Mrs. Naidu delivered in Madras at a youth rally in 1903. "Having travelled, having conceived, having hoped, having enlarged by love, having widened by sympathies, having come into contact with different races, different communities, different religions, different civilizations, friends, my vision is clear. I have no prejudice of race, creed, caste or colour.... Until you students have acquired and mastered that spirit of brotherhood do not believe it possible that you will ever cease to be sectarian....If I may use such a word... that you will be ever national".

She was right Where are the people who talk or think in terms of the nation? Do we hear leaders telling the people as Sarojini did in South Africa, "Ask not what Africa can do for you, but what you can do for Africa?" There was a time when to see our national flag fluttering would cause a thrill of pride or when one stood erect to the ringing words of our national anthem. A wave of love and hope would rush through huge crowds when listening to Gandhiji or Nehru or Sarojini.

Sarojini's oratory stirred minds and hearts in epic ways. Dr. Radhakrishnan once said of her, "she lifted us beyond ourselves to another plane". It was this quality that wrought miracles in times of stress, as for instance, at the time of Congress session when she boldly took the floor, fought out with Subhash Bose the issue of Congress Presidentship.

She often acted as 'harmonizer' between warring factions and groups within the nationalist ranks and owed her success largely to her rollicking

humour. Often she would interject a drollery to relieve tension. But, at heart, she was pained to see in-fighting that was going around her. Addressing the All India Students Federation in Calcutta in early forties she observed, "I feel my generation has set so bad an example, so suicidal an example to the younger generation that they are steeped in quarrels, in internecine warfare and communal quarrels, that they quarrel over mere words. Why not take the reality of the situation of your own country...."

Unity of India, India free of religious strife and hatred was central to her life. Having been brought up in Hyderabad, the Hindu and Muslim cultures permeated her personality. Her passionate belief in secularism was product of her early environment. All this came out so clearly in her Congress Presidential address in 1925 "...it will be my lowly though difficult task, through the coming year, to set my mother's house in order, to reconcile the tragic quarrels that threaten the integrity of her old joint family life of diverse communities and creeds...."

Struggle for freedom from British rule was a heady thing in those days. There were underground movements. In fact there was revolution in the air. Mrs. Naidu made herself champion of every cause—from literature to education, women's emancipation and social reform. She plunged headlong in the fiercer political arena. She held on her own with indomitable courage. Many a time she quelled violent crowds. Her voice was not loud and tinkled more often than not with laughter; that throaty chuckle we all know so well. Nonetheless it could command. Many a time people were carried away by her oratory and afterwards would remark what a marvellous speech! But what did she say?

— Perhaps her faculty for creating deep emotion than turning on intellectual response was a major reason why her critics found it easy to dismiss her revolutionary role. There were some who felt that she was a product of feudal culture who loved good things of life and that her contribution to nationalist movements was not enough. They argued that she did not have grass roots elements of which Gandhiji was made of. Gandhian simplicity, a truely Indian manifestation of our ethos, was the dominant ideal. But how quickly we have rejected Gandhism and have reverted to the good things of life. Sarojini was no hypocrite. She lived in her own style, externally with luxury but internally with simplicity. Wearing khadi may have offended her aesthetic sense, but her revolutionary and reformist mind saw in it the poor by which our ancient skills and handicrafts could be revived.

Her householder days were beautiful but brief. The nation called. The call was clear and she responded. "What I have done to change the world???" She was prepared to sacrifice her family life for a higher call. Her involve-

ment in the nationalist movement incapacitated her to be with her family longer than was necessary. Only a twentieth part of a month she could be with her children at Hyderabad¹.

For all outwarded gaiety, Sarojini was a sad person. She had struggled in every possible field from the emancipation of women to emancipation of her country. But Independence brought sorrow both to her and her guru, Gandhiji. Her dream of communal harmony had been shattered. She had said to Gokhale that "India would achieve Hindu-Muslim unity in five years" but she now witnessed division of the country. Her dreams had not been realized.

Sarojini Naidu's Views on Social Issues of Her Time

By

Bina Roy

“When the terror and tumult of hate shall cease
And life be refashioned on anvils of peace,
And your love shall offer memorial thanks
To the comrades who fought in your dauntless ranks,
And your honour the deeds of the deathless ones,
Remember the blood of my martyred sons...”

“The Gift of India” by Sarojini Naidu

I

This verse reflects the personality that Sarojini Naidu was—a poet turned politician. However, Nissim Ezekiel, reviewing her collection of poems *The Feather of the Dawn* says, “Sarojini knew nothing of the literary revolutions taking place in English poetry in the twenties and earlier”.¹ Exactly a year ago, on the date and about the same time, Mrs. Lakshmi Menon delivered a talk at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, at the beginning of the year long celebrations of the centenary of her birth. She mentioned Mrs. Naidu’s response to some questions raised by Aldous Huxley, “.....people insist on calling me a politician when I never pretended to be one. It is really an irony of fate and a joke”.²

In analysing this issue Mrs. Menon brought out that the true approach needed to understand Mrs. Naidu is to realise that she was a true humanist who loved people with all their joys and sorrows. She draws the conclusion that owing to this humane attitude towards social problems in India, she became the bard leading and inspiring the masses in their freedom movement under Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhiji considered that in our freedom movement five things needed first attention: (i) non-violence, (ii) khadi (iii) Hindu-Muslim unity (iv) Harijans and (v) women. In the pre-Independence period, it was not possible to

¹*Sunday Standard*, Feb. 11, 1962.

²Manuscript at Nehru Memorial Library.

keep these five strands strictly separate. It was a theory expected to be realised in life in free India. Needless to say that all these five points of work for national regeneration are meant basically to improve the social life of the Indian people as a whole.

During the years immediately following independence in 1947 one often heard and read about the stages in which true and complete freedom will be achieved. The first stage had just been completed with the achievement of political freedom, i.e., the decision making power now belongs to the Indian people to shape and direct the course of their destiny. The second stage was that of economic freedom which was expected to be achieved on the basis of free India's own political decisions. Finally, the third stage of social liberation was expected to be the normal consequence of political and economic freedom.

Sarojini Naidu was caught up in this movement led by Mahatma Gandhi to usher in a new India of social equality. She not only dreamed of it and worked for it in the Gandhian movement, but she lived up to everything she proposed. She talked and inspired millions to break down social barriers. She was only too conscious of the existing barriers, but being involved in the struggle to win the first stage of freedom, she had no time to concentrate on any single area of activity. However, she expressed a sincere concern for all the existing social problems of her time and lost no opportunity to point these out to those who were actively involved in removing social evils. She expressed with her eloquent power what she expected Indian society to be.

Of the five points mentioned by Gandhiji, non-violence, khadi and Hindu-Muslim unity were activities which got intermingled with and overcharged with the political issues of the first phase of the freedom movement. The question of harijans and women remained in the background as purely social issues. One other aspect of social issue, received her special attention, viz., her approach to the youth of India. In her writings and speeches referring to India's regeneration, two things stand out. The first one is that these efforts, large or small each trying to remedy one type of social problem, were like small feeders swelling the fast flowing river of the national movement; the other was that her expressions were poetic in language and inspiration. It was impossible to separate Mrs. Naidu's views on social issues from the national movement and/or her poetry. I reproduce only one of these;

At Dawn³

Children, my children, the daylight is breaking,
The cymbals of morn sound the hour of your waking,

³Naidu's *The Sceptred Flute : Songs of India*. Allahabad, Kitabistan, 1946, p. 129.

The long night is o'er, and our labour is ended,
 Fair blow the fields that we tilled and we tended,
 Swiftly the harvest grows mellow for reaping,
 The harvest we sowed for the time of your sleeping.

Weak were our hands but our service was tender,
 In darkness we dreamed the dawn of your splendour,
 In silence we strove for the joy of the morrow,
 And watered your seeds from the wells of our sorrow,
 We toiled to enrich the glad hour of your waking,
 Our vigil is done, lo ! the daylight is breaking.

Children, my children, who wake to inherit
 The ultimate hope of our travailing spirit,
 Say, when your young hearts shall take to their keeping,
 The manifold dreams have sown for your reaping,
 Is it praise, is it pain you will grant us for guerdon?
 Anoint with your love or arraign with your pardon?

II

Of the social issues which the leaders of the national movement gave priority to, the one of women received Mrs. Naidu's maximum attention. She symbolised those women who, inspite of a happy life plunged themselves whole heartedly in the new opportunities of work in the larger interests of the nation. In fact wherever she went she was recognised as brilliant, charming, challenging, kind and understanding in her approach to all human questions. This recognition came to her not only in India but also in other lands which she visited.

With her insight she understood the joys and sorrows, expectations and hopes of women of all categories including women vendors in cities and rural poor group. In her poems, she reflects the whole range of moods and emotions with superb subtlety of expression. Dr. P. V. Rajyalakshmi points out that this range of moods even comprehends mystic communications, and that her reflections of folk theme show "genuine understanding and appreciation of India's folk culture. She projects totality of others'....customs, beliefs, legends, mimicry, games, festivals.....,"⁴ One has only to read her little poems on subjects such as "Festival of the Sea", "Gypsy Girl", "Banjara Women", "Zobida" and "Gulnar".

⁴Rajyalakshmi, P. V., *The Lyric Spring*, New Delhi, Abhinav Publications, 1977, p. 183.

Her speeches have not been recorded carefully for posterity. But some important statements which have been recorded can be said to-day—30 years after we started using our power for decision making on economic and social issues.

In her speech at a meeting of the Hindu Social Reform Association held in Secunderabad in 1906, she said, “Every place has a social reform association. But what have they done? The word ‘To-day’ is not in our dictionary. ‘Tomorrow’ is the watchword. There is anxiety shown everywhere for the introduction of social reform into families of others but not in one’s own family.....”⁵

At the 22nd session of the Indian National Social Conference, held in 1908, she inspired a resolution for providing educational facilities for widows, establishment of women’s homes and removing obstacles to their re-marriage.

On women’s education her statements in 1906 and 1908 could be repeated today by those fighting for improving the status of woman in the current International Decade for Women. At the Indian Social Conference held in Calcutta in 1906 she said, “....at this great moment of stress and striving, when Indian races are seeking the ultimate unity of a common national ideal, it is well for us to remember that the success of the whole movement lies centred in what is known as the *women question*....”⁶ But it seems to me that there is not even an unanimous acceptance of the fact that education of women is an essential factor in the process of nation building”.⁷

Later, in the same conference she referred to a controversy on women’s education published in *Indian Ladies Magazine* which reflected that all women expressed themselves for education but there was division in men’s camp. While some agreed, “others took fright at the very idea, ‘What?’”, they cried, “education for our women? What then will become of the comfortable domestic ‘ideals as exemplified by the luscious *halwa* and savoury *omelette*? Others again were neither for Jove nor Jehova, but for compromise bringing forward a whole syllabus of compromises, ‘Teach this’, they said, ‘and not that’. But my friends, in the matter of education you cannot say thus far and no further. Neither can you say to the winds of heaven, ‘Blow not where ye list’, nor forbid the waves to cross their boundaries, nor the human soul to soar beyond the bounds of arbitrary limitations”.⁸

⁵*Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu*, Madras, p. 22

⁶Underline mine.

⁷*Speeches* p. 18

⁸Underline mine, pp. 18-19.

In 1908, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya was giving a talk at the Pachaiappa's College Historical Association. After his speech Mrs. Naidu responded that women in other advanced countries constituted a most potent factor in the political evolution of a country. In India, while men were educated and kept abreast, women were lagging behind.⁹

Under her inspiration, the Women's Indian Association at its conference in 1936, published *Women's Manifesto* to the candidates standing for election to the Provincial and Central legislatures and all other public bodies. This could be reproduced and used today by women's organisations in emphasizing the social issues needing legislative and executive action¹⁰.

To the women in their own gatherings she would say the same but equally forcefully each time—as she did at the Indian Ladies Club at Pittapwam in 1915, “.....I say that it is time for us all women of India, to awake, whatever our race, or caste or creed, or rank in life, to awaken and grasp the urgency of the situation in the immediate need of adequate and equal co-operation and comradeship in guiding, moulding, sustaining and achieving those lofty and patriotic ideals that thrill the heart of every generation and in whose fulfilment lies the noblest destiny of man”.¹¹

It was under the leadership of Sarojini Naidu and others that the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) was founded. One of the successful achievements of this organisation was to press for non-communal representation when the British Parliament was preparing for special representation in the constitution of India for minorities. True this move did not succeed against the forces in England which ultimately decided the issue at that time. However, it is on record that women of all religions, castes and creeds, through the AIWC made a strong plea for non-communal representation.

Another interesting story which I am not able to authenticate yet with appropriate documentation has reference to the Hindu Code Bill. Before she passed away, she was addressing a meeting at the University Institute Hall in Calcutta organised by some local women's organisations to express their support for the Bill. The orthodox reactionary group crowded the hall in great numbers. Mrs. Naidu was quick enough to sense the situation. In her speech she demolished all orthodox arguments so thoroughly that before her speech ended people were prepared to leave the hall in groups. It is needless to say how the meeting ended after this group chose not to stay.

⁹*Speeches*, p. 26.

¹⁰Women's Indian Association, *Eighteenth and Nineteenth Report, 1934-1936*, Madras, "Everest", Lahore, 1936, pp. 32-33.

¹¹*Speeches*, p. 73.

III

The young generation of men and women were naturally attracted to her for she could talk to each one in his or her own idiom. At the same time, she was concerned that the young men and women of her time would one day inherit the struggle for national freedom and progress and carry it forward. The point that she wanted them to understand is found in her address on “Time Brotherhood” at Pachaiappa’s College in 1903.

“.....Having travelled....conceived....hoped....having contacts with all communities, religions.... civilisations.....my vision is clear. I have no prejudice of race, creed, caste or colour....Be an Indian and not a madrasee.....”¹²

Her vision was that the young men and women of her country should grow up to be true Indians and rise above narrow local, linguistic, racial and religious identities. She was also aware of the fact that the quality of the nation did not depend on the excellence of a few outstanding persons or a small group of elites. Work had to be done to uplift the masses so that the average quality of the people continue to rise higher. She expressed this in an address entitled “The Hope of Tomorrow” given at the Madras Students Convention.

She was disturbed when she found the youth callous about the state of the country and society and their own responsibility to improve the existing conditions. I witnessed one of these at the main hall of Lucknow University. Mrs. Naidu was expected to arrive any moment. The hall was over-crowded and catcalls started from the gallery above. She was hardly noticed in the crowd. She was up on the platform. By then the noise on the floor of the hall had stopped but not from the gallery. After she was introduced, the first thing she did was to mimic the catcalls, perfect to the last details of sound. The first response was laughter, but Mrs. Naidu looked serious and continued to mimic the catcalls until the students realised that she would speak only when there was complete silence. As she began to speak she literally administered a strongly worded rebuke to students about their lack of responsibility. She reminded them of the work that the Chinese students and students elsewhere were doing for their nation, while Indian students were whiling away their time in futile activities.

This was not the first time she noticed shortcoming in the youth. She

¹²*ibid*, pp. 9-11.

wrote in the poem entitled "Life"

"Children, ye have not lived, ye but exist
 Till some resistless hour shall rise and move
 Your hearts to wake and hunger after love
 And thirst with passionate longing for the things
 That burn your brows with blood-red sufferings.

Till ye have battled with great grief and fears,
 And borne the conflict of dream shattering years,
 Wounded with fierce desire and worn with strife
 Children, you have not lived, for this is life".¹³

IV

On poverty and related national economic reconstruction her views are no less relevant in the present context. Mrs. Lakshmi Menon, in her talk given last year quotes Mrs. Naidu as having said that a few palaces, universities and modern appliances are not adequate for the advancement of a nation, "Is this the criterion of progress?" She asked and continued, "no, believe me, your progress, your liberty, your achievement, will only be worth having when there is food in every village".

In her presidential address in 1925 as Congress President she covered the need for village reconstruction and education along with the politically charged issues of non-violent, non-cooperation and Hindu-Muslim unity. She emphasised that national reconstruction needed personal and collective sacrifice, and invisible faith and commitment to the cause of unity of the nation for the struggle ahead—

"With palms uplifted in ardent supplication, I pray that to us in our coming hour of travail may be granted in sufficient measure an invisible faith and inflexible courage, and that He in whose name we begin our labour today will in the hour of our triumph keep us humble and in the beautiful words of our ancient invocation:

"Lead us out of the unreal into the Real
 Out of darkness into the light
 Out of Death into Immortality".

My own personal memory is still quite vivid about her presence and impact on every one at the 49th session of the Indian National Congress held at

¹³Naidu's. *The Sceptred Flute*: p. 35.

Lucknow in 1936. She was personally interested in the welfare of each and every volunteer in the Congress camp she met.

In terms of decisions on national policy for the country's development, the focus was on rural development and improvement of the life style of agricultural labourers and cultivators. The Congress policy adopted in 1936 emphasised the freedom of organisation of agricultural labourers, their emancipation from feudal levies, substantial reduction in rent and revenue, fast and fair relief from agricultural indebtedness and safeguarding their interests vis-a-vis the state, allotment in state expenditure for economic, social and cultural amenities, freedom from oppression and harassment from government officials, protection against restrictions on utilisation of natural facilities for domestic and agricultural needs and, finally, fostering incentive for relieving rural unemployment.

It was truly a revolutionary concept evolved under the leadership of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as the then Congress President. At the end of business Pandit Nehru mentioned that, "It is customary on such occasion when all business is over for someone to indulge in a funeral oration. So Mrs. Naidu has come here uninvited to deliver that oration....."

Mrs. Naidu, reflecting on the far reaching decisions of that Congress said.

"In this city of old traditions....we have witnessed the birth of a new vision, the coming of a new dream. I am here on your behalf, to bear testimony to the marvellous miracles that have happened for us and for India. Out of the past has come the future not by resolution but by proper, decent evolution.....For the first time has that note been sounded, has that vision been revealed, has that prophecy been made that Congress should realise that India shall be an integral part of the great world scheme of freedom and liberation. And so, if Jawaharlal thinks that it is a funeral oration it is a funeral oration to the dead yesterday but a welcome oration to tomorrow, to the dawn of which the President is the herald..... to be able to hold together in friendliness elements which might have been hostile to one another and irreconcilable with one another. Therefore, I end with adieu to yesterday and welcome tomorrow in which we join together in our pilgrimage towards the dawn of liberty". It was past midnight and the session ended with "Vande Mataram" rending the silence of the night.

V

Inspite of her family responsibilities and frail health, she never failed to face the most difficult situations with humility, simplicity and yet conviction

and courage. Above all, she was endowed with the healing gift of a sense of humour and pen which resolved tensions within a group. Her ability to laugh at herself and others was so refined and without any malice that she carried individuals and groups with her as no other could.

Some have raised the question, was she pleased with the freedom as it came dividing India and shattering the dream of united free India as dreamed by our freedom fighters. Those who know her intimately feel that she was sad but few only sensed it. Yet outwardly she was the same person, full of humour, with time to meet each one at a very personal level. That she knew that life has its setbacks and one must be ready for them is reflected also in her writings—e.g. “Conquest”¹⁴ written in 1927 and “The Soul’s Prayer”¹⁵ first published in India in 1943 but published elsewhere much earlier.

¹⁴Naidu, S. *The Feature of the Dawn*: New York; Asia Publishing House, 1961, pp. 32-33.

¹⁵Naidu, S. *The Sceptred Flute*: pp. 123-124.

Sarojini Naidu and Asian Consciousness

By

S.A.I. Tirmizi

Presiding over the first Asian Relations Conference on 23rd March, 1947, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu said, "We are at the first spring time of the world. I bid you, arise from your grave; I bid you, become the bard of eternal spring . . . we shall move together, the people of Asia undefeated by disaster and not discouraged by anything that may befall other people. . . ."¹ This impassioned utterance formed the core of her address to the delegates from forty countries who had assembled in the historic Purana Qila, New Delhi, less than five months before India became independent. Early in 1947 it appeared that the days of Asia's servitude to the Western colonial powers were numbered. Sarojini Naidu could rightly foresee the future. She said, "Remember, the night of darkness is over. Let us march forward to the dawn". Behind these dreams and visions was one exulting hope that the old time glory and greatness of Asia seemed destined to return. In the light of this background I propose to examine, in this paper, the role of Mrs. Naidu in the development of Asian Consciousness on the basis of her address.

II

Before we talk of Asian Consciousness we must define what we mean by Asia because Asia has not always meant the same thing down the ages. As far as we know the term was perhaps first used by Homer in his *Iliad*. It is interesting to note that in Greek mythology the continents are always referred to in feminine terms. Europe and Asia are all women names. Asia in those days meant only a part of what some time back was called Asia Minor.²

It is no doubt that all the three major religions of the world—Buddhism, Christianity and Islam—originated in what is now called the Asian continent. It is also true that Asia has been the home of many civilizations, and till the 15th century Europe was an appendage of Asia—a Peninsula jutting out of the Asian mainland.

Asia has had great creative eras of civilizations. The Arabs in Spain, the Mongols in Russia, the Turks in Hungary formed the outposts of victorious

¹*Proceedings of the Asian Relations Conference*, p. 31.

²*Studies in Asian History*, (New Delhi, 1969), p. 3.

Asia. But by the end of 16th century its vigour was completely exhausted and it sank into timeless immobility. In the wars between the East and the West, Europe assumed the role of an aggressor. By the end of 19th century great part of Asia fell under the domination of the Western imperialism. In the north Czarist Russia had absorbed a big chunk of Central Asia. In the South and South East Britain, Holland and France had established their colonial or semi-colonial rule. The conquest of India, spread over a century from the Plassey to the Revolt, was the main stride towards European domination of Asia, and most of the others followed from it. British power radiated from India. Only those countries could preserve their independence that already had some national tradition and consciousness and some advantage of size or situation. Turkey had the rudiments of nationhood, Kamal Ataturk had reshaped Turkish society on western pattern at an early stage. Persia hung on precariously. Practically all the rest of West Asian countries lost their independence. It was in the Far East that nationalism was better developed and nationalism could be grafted most successfully and modern technology adopted. Japan alone was successful in accomplishing this feat. China survived partly because of its vastness. Its national unity was another factor, which delayed armed attack on it until 1839 when the conquest of India was about at an end.

Like all great historical processes the new contact between the East and the West was phenomenal. It was the outcome of action and reaction. It was European civilization which imparted some of its vigour to Asia. She had awakened a new consciousness among the subject peoples. In other words it directed the awakened East in its search for new forms of intellectual, social and political life. In this process the inner life of Asian countries was violently shaken. Religious and traditional moral codes loosened their sway over the more progressive sections of Asian societies. It was an experiment in the shaping of individual and collective life on ideals borrowed from the European civilization. But one disastrous consequence of European expansion in Asia has been the isolation of Asian countries from one another.³ It appeared as if the old land routes had ceased to function in the era of colonialism. 'India's window to the outward looked out on the sea routes', as Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru pointed out to the delegates at the Asian Relations Conference, 'which led to England'. Europe became for Asia the centre of gravity.

III

Yet there were some links among the Asian people. Mrs. Naidu, in her stirring speech, recalled those links. She underlined the necessity and urgency of renewing and strengthening them. Welcoming the delegates she said, "I

³Asian Relations Conference, p. 22.

bid you welcome to my Mother's home. I bid you welcome so that you may remember your ancient greatness, so that you and we together dream a common dream of our Asia".⁴

What was the stuff of those historical memories which Mrs. Naidu pointedly referred to again and again? It will, of course, be absurd to pretend that an intellectual synthesis, a sort of distilled essence of Asia existed. There is no denying the fact that there were some common elements in the Asian psyche. A body of religious, moral and artistic ideas had freely travelled in Asian countries over the centuries and deeply influenced the societies. Despite the fact that the classical civilizations of China, India and West Asia were disparate, there had grown what may be called an Asian belief or sentiment. The cultures of Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Indo-China and Philippines were largely influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism as also Islam and Christianity. Asia was not a religious unit, but everywhere its fundamental attitude towards religious questions was more or less the same. Throughout Asia there were two important groups each representing a circle. These two circles intersected in India, which in the recent history of Asia has often been a focal point in more sense than one. The western circle was Islam. Its sphere of influence stretched from Africa eastwards as far as India, China, and Malaya Peninsula. The eastern circle embraced India, Ceylon, Tibet, China and Japan. Inspite of the differences distinguishing Hinduism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, all the three have, nevertheless, a kindred attitude towards life.⁵

India has been recipient of ideas and influences from West Asia for centuries. Islamic complex of ideas had profoundly shaped her thought and institutions. It is for this reason that Mrs. Naidu was prompted to remark, "India is not a civilization of one unit. India is today not a Hindu India of the Vedic ages....the Western stream of culture that came with the message of the Prophet, the great democratic ideal became in time an inalienable part of our national culture. Those streams of cultures came and fed us as tributaries, the vast ocean of India".⁶ She went on to add, "Did we not in our own turn send to Southeast Asia the great treasures of ours in India, Gautama Buddha—the teaching of peace? Did we not send to China, to Japan, to Ceylon, to Burma, the influence, the philosophy and wisdom of Asia and the teachings of Gautama Buddha?....We have never been a people so limited in our vision". She summed up, "India has been the universal custodian of many influences which other nations had created".⁷

⁴Ibid., p. 31.

⁵Kahn, Hans, *A History of Nationalism in the East*, p. 8.

⁶Asian Relations Conference, p. 30.

⁷Ibid., p. 31.

India's religious and cultural expansion in South and Southeast Asia was a unique historical phenomenon. "An Indian, wherever he goes in Asia", observed Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, "feels a sense of kindship with the lands he visits and the people he meets". In 1932 when Rabindranath Tagore visited Iran he told the audience in Tehran, "There is not much difference between your people and ours, the general outlook on life and temperament seems to be very much alike". He added, "in our home in Bengal the spirit of Iran was a living force when I was a child".⁸

IV

Apart from these historic links by which the Asian societies were bound, this sentiment has been reinforced by their common resentment of the white man's assumption of superiority. Sir Valentine Chirol, a close observer of the Asian scene, wrote in 1925, "Never before the white man stressed the colour-bar as he does today as the rampart of his racial superiority. Never before the Orient denied his claim to racial superiority so emphatically as it does today. It denied it sometimes with all the fierceness of atavistic instincts revived by the clash of conflicting civilizations and religions".⁹

The rise of anti-colonial movement in India strengthened the sentiment of Asian unity. But one single event which tended to give it an accelerated momentum was the rise of Japan and her victories, over land and sea, against Russia in Asia. The victory over Russia, a European power, had shattered the illusion of European invincibility. In India, at least, the news helped to raise the self-confidence and self-esteem of the people. The war symbolised the first battle in the struggle for Asia's freedom. "Asia is a unity", proclaimed the noted Japanese artist, Kakuzo Okakura.

Ananda Coomaraswamy¹⁰ in 1910 had voiced similar sentiments. He wrote, "To Europe in this crisis, the East brings a message . . . more profound and far-reaching, than that which resulted from the rediscovery of the classic world of the West. As the message of the West has been one of diversity, analysis, and the separate self, so the message of the East is one of unity of all life, of synthesis, and the universal self". He condemned the West because it threatened to smoother true Asiatic civilization. A century of "progress" has brought India to the stage where almost everything of beauty and romance belongs to her past . . . India and the East must proclaim their own message through their own life".

⁸Nag, Dr. Kalinath, *Discovery of Asia*, p. 127.

⁹Chirol, Tsurumi, Salter, *The Re-awakening of the Orient*, p. 5.

¹⁰Coomaraswamy, Ananda, *Message of the East* (1910) quoted in Kahn's *History of Nationalism in the East*, p. 169.

The next major thrust towards the consolidation of Asian sentiment was the visit of Tagore to Japan in 1916. The object of his visit was to propagate the renescent Eastern civilization. In three public lectures : (a) 'India and Japan', (b) 'The Message of India to Japan', (c) 'The Spirit of Japan' Tagore presented the view of Eastern civilization and the ideals it stood for. In his mission he was reassured by his British, French, German and American friends (themselves disenchanted with Europe in consequence of the War of 1914-18). He said that "the West needed the healing power of Oriental religion and philosophy to save it from its self-destructive only".¹¹ Later during his visits to China in 1924 and to Iran in 1932 his motive was to link Asia's intellectuals in the mission of revitalising the common Asian heritage of peace-giving light and love.

It was in 1923 that Iqbal published his collection of Persian verses and labeled it *Payam-Mashreq* or Message of the East. The collection, as the title suggests, was intended to be an answer or rather a return of gifts, to Goethe, the German poet, who had acknowledged his debt to the East in his *Ost Westerliche Diwan*. In the Introduction of the book Iqbal discusses the 'Eastern Movement in German Letters'. He dwells at length on the new springing and says:

We are not Afghans, we are not Turks or Tartars
 We are of one garden and one branch,
 The thought of colour and smell is anathematus
 For we are nurtured by the same new spring.¹²

Tagore and Iqbal in India, Ku-hung Ming in China, each in his own way, gave expression to the same trend of thought.¹³

V

Social and material problems act and react in the theories and practices of the Russian Revolution (1917). There was a radical readjustment of relations between European powers and Asian states. When Russia renounced all former privileges of the Russian state in China, Persia, Afghanistan and Turkey, for the first time a European power recognised Asiatic states as genuinely possessing equal rights. The Third International¹⁴ went a step further when it said "The Labour and Socialist International hails the awakening of the great working masses of the Chinese, Indian and Mohammedan worlds". In 1925 the Socialist parties resolved to wage a continuous

¹¹Kohn, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

¹²Iqbal Singh, *The Ardent Pilgrim*, (Calcutta, 1951), pp. 12-14.

¹³Hay, Stephen, *Asian Ideas of East and West*, p. 9.

¹⁴Kohn, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

and energetic fight for the right of self-determination of the oppressed nations of Asia and Africa.

VI

The nationalist movement in India was making a slow but certain progress. Its achievements till the first World War comprised only a few constitutional concessions. As Asia was brought more directly into the whirlpool of world politics after the first World War, the movement launched a frontal attack against the British. This gave the much needed fillip to the growth of Asian consciousness which now ran parallel to Indian nationalism. Not content with voicing sympathy with the various Asian countries, the Congress also visualised the establishment of an Asian federation. This was for the first time stated by C.R. Dass in 1922 in the course of his Presidential address.¹⁵ In 1927 Dr. M.A. Ansari reiterated the same sentiment in his Presidential address¹⁶. In the thirties it was apparent that British imperialism was fighting a losing battle. The second World War accelerated this process. The nationalist movement in India acted as an inspiration to similar movements in southeast Asia. In this broadcast on 7 September, 1946 as Vice-President of the Interim National Government of India, Pt. Nehru declared that Indians belonged to Asia and the peoples of Asia were nearest and closer to them than others.¹⁷ In March 1947 addressing the Asian Relations Conference Pt. Nehru remarked: "The old imperialisms are fading away".

The people of Asia were awake. Their age-old isolation was breaking down. Mrs. Sarojini Naidu affirmed that across the length and breadth of our great continent....there is today a spirit that says 'we are alive'. She appealed to the delegates to frame a common charter of freedom and 'take an indestructible pledge of the unity of Asia'. This declaration of faith was echoed in the speeches of several delegates.¹⁸ It was a unique meeting and the mood appropriate. She exhorted them to sanctify this meeting by taking a resolve to strengthen Asian solidarity. She refuted the allegation as appeared in a section of the Western press that Asian Conference was an attempt to prop up an Asian bloc against the Western civilization. She observed that Asia stood for peace. This message of peace and love is an old message. Today it is reinforced by the suffering and hope of the Asian peoples. She stressed that resurgent Asia will not forge new weapons of war but will produce soldiers of peace and love.

¹⁵Studies in Asian History, p. 279.

¹⁶ibid., pp. 279-80.

¹⁷ibid. p. 283.

¹⁸Asian Relations Conference, pp. 39-70.

Sarojini Naidu as a Freedom Fighter

By

P.K. Ghosh

Born in Hyderabad, Sarojini Naidu was the first among the subjects of Princely India who rose to the stature of a national leader. She personified in her a rare harmony of a poet and a patriot. Freedom was her life's lyric.

Sarojini had gifted parents. Her father, Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya was a Brahmo who grew up in the climate of 19th century renaissant Bengal. He combined in himself love of learning and high-mindedness. Sarojini, besides absorbing intellectual influences at home, inherited her father's courage and love of truth. From her mother, Varada Sundari Devi, she inherited the poetic gift.

She had already earned the reputation of a poetess by twenty-one years' of age. She did not choose the seclusion of an ivory tower. She was to be drawn into the grim world of politics. In 1904 she attended the Congress session at Bombay as an observer. But the first event that hurt her sense of justice was the partition of Bengal in 1905. Curzon's resolve to partition the Bengal Presidency and thereby divide the Bengali speaking population was considered as an affront and a challenge to be met. She left for Bengal and plunged herself headlong into the anti-partition agitation. The movement gained momentum and generated anti-British feeling as much among the elites as among the masses. It was a formative period for many who were to play significant roles in the nationalist struggle later on. Sarojini, too, was drawn in and she partook of the popular moods. At the Calcutta Session in 1906 the identities of so-called Moderates and Extremists within the Congress were clearly marked off. Sarojini spoke at the Congress platform but without identifying herself with any of the two camps. However, her role as a constitutionalist of the Moderate brand was soon established. In the Congress crisis of 1907 she was drawn towards Gopal Krishna Gokhale and followed the political philosophy he espoused. In 1914, during her visit to London, as Gokhale's emissary she was attracted by Gandhiji and for the rest of her life she remained loyal to him. Thus her role as a political worker was clearly defined—self-government and inter-communal harmony. To this she added the emancipation of women her special sphere of action.

In defining her public role, one is conscious that one is casting this mercurial personality in a straight jacket. In fact all causes which stemmed from

the desire to ameliorate the condition of Indians anywhere in the world elicited her deepest response. She collaborated with C.F. Andrews in his crusade to remove the grievances of the distressed indentured Indian labour in South Africa.

But her main platform was the Congress from where she could express her feelings or project her ideas on specific issues. At the Lucknow session (December 1916) Sarojini moved a resolution against the disgraceful Arms Act. The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms were considered a half measure which did not satisfy nationalist India. But the introduction of Rowlatt Bills in the Council generated an unprecedented agitation in the country. The Punjab tragedy wounded the nationalist heart at its deepest. India was restless and hypersensitive. Mrs. Naidu was touched to the quick by the tragedy and she felt the national disgrace much more keenly than she did at the partition of Bengal. Anglo-Indian bureaucracy at heart applauded General Dyer for his action at the Jallianwala Bagh. Finding that justice was not to be had in India, Sarojini Naidu joined a select deputation to Britain in July 1919 to protest against the severities of martial law administration and in particular to seek justice for the outraged women of the Punjab. On 3rd June 1920 she made a speech at the Kingsway Hall in London on the 'agony and shame of the Punjab'. The upshot of the debate in the House of Commons left her still more disenchanted with the Raj. She wrote to the Secretary of State, Edwin Montagu and impressed upon him that the Congress sub-committee's report on the Punjab atrocities was factually correct. The reply she received characterized the allegations as 'wholly untrue'. Next day the same official replying on behalf of Montagu admitted some of the allegations and added that the offenders were subordinate police officials. Unimpressed by the lifeless debate in the Commons, Sarojini wrote to Gandhiji that she had lost all faith in the British sense of justice. In July 1921 she returned to India totally disillusioned.

Gandhiji had, in the meanwhile, launched the Non-Cooperation Movement. Although the Congress at its Calcutta and Nagpur Sessions in September and December 1920 had endorsed the movement but it was only at the end of 1921 that it was formally launched beginning with the demonstration in Bombay against the visiting Prince of Wales. Although Sarojini did not court arrest, she was actively involved in it to make the British boycott a success. As a believer in non-violence, she was even engaged in quelling the riots in Bombay. Being a signatory to the Non-Cooperation Manifesto, she was committed to Gandhiji's programme.

In January 1924 Mrs. Naidu visited Africa and presided over the East African Indians Congress at Mombassa. She was invited again in November 1929 to preside over the same Congress. Both the sessions were inspired by

the apartheid laws based on racial discrimination. She visited United States as an envoy of nationalist India to enlist support for the cause of freedom.

She had gained stature and was a front rank leader now. In 1925 she was elected to preside over the Congress session at Kanpur. Nothing spectacular happened during this period until towards the close of the decade. In December 1929 the Congress declared complete independence as its goal. Gandhiji also decided to launch Civil Disobedience Movement. As a test case he decided to break the salt laws at Dandi.

The salt satyagraha and the march to Dandi began to grow in people's imagination. Satyagrahis flocked to Gandhiji's march and on April 6 he broke the salt laws by making salt from sea water. He was arrested. The leadership of the movement fell on Abbas Tyabji and after his arrest on Mrs. Naidu.

Mrs. Naidu went to Dharasana. As was planned satyagrahis were to take part in a raid. This was followed by series of raids on the Wadala salt depot. The most spectacular of the raid took place on 1st June wherein 15,000 volunteers participated in the action. The American newsman Webb Miller recorded in detail this great event. Dr. R.C. Majumdar observes:

"His (Miller's) description has an epic grandeur about it, and will go down in history as the finest memorial of the martyrs of civil disobedience launched by Gandhi in 1930".

The assemblage of the volunteers near Dharasana made the Government somewhat anxious. The area was cut off from the rest of the world and steps were taken to prevent news going out of the place. Miller himself was forced out of the train at Bulsar. With difficulty he reached Dungeri, the railway station near Dharasana and met Sarojini and her non-violent army. They continued the march till they were stopped by the police. The volunteers were severely beaten. They were cordoned off by the police. The young volunteers remained undeterred by hunger and thirst. Among them sat under the hot summer sun brave and smiling Sarojini Naidu. Miller reports, "Mme. Naidu called for prayer before the march started and the entire assemblage knelt. She exhorted them, 'Gandhi's body is in jail but his soul is with you. India's prestige is in your hands. You must not use violence under any circumstances. You will be beaten but you must not resist, you must not raise a hand to ward off blows. Wild, shrill cheers terminated her speech."

Slowly in silence the throng commenced the half-mile march"

The club of the policeman fell on the volunteers. Despite their merciless beating, the marchers remained non-violent. Sarojini was arrested and sent

to prison. Dharasana will always remain as *the* event in the story of salt satyagrah. It was the first time Sarojini had the taste of police action and she was prepared to face it with courage.

Her faith in Gandhiji's leadership was absolute. She remained close to him as an unquestioning disciple. She went with him to Britain to attend the Round Table Conference. She was with him when Gandhiji went on fast in the Yervada jail. She was imprisoned with him in the Agha Khan Palace in Pune. In 1943 she was released. In fact she was the first among the Congress Working Committee members to come out of the jail.

Freedom from foreign rule was welcome but the division of India and the consequences that flowed from it left Mrs. Naidu a sad person. Despite this she wore a cheerful expression. As Governor of United Provinces she immersed herself in the task of consolidation of that freedom and in the developmental programmes of her charge. The oratorical gifts which she had so amply and successfully employed in her addresses during the freedom struggle were no less helpful in the successful performance of her new role. Mrs. Naidu was courageous woman. She combined in herself the roles of a housewife, a poet, a politician and a social reformer. It was the saga of a complete life.

Contributors

- Prof. V.V. John : Educationist, Ex-Vice-Chancellor, Jodhpur University.
- Tara Ali Baig : Social worker and writer; author of official biography of Sarojini Naidu.
- Dr. Bina Roy : Educationist, Former President, International Federation of University Women.
- S.A.I. Tirmizi : Director, National Archives of India.
- P. K. Ghosh : Archivist, National Archives of India.

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